

United Nations Backgrounder



The United Nations was established on October 24, 1945 by 51 countries committed to preserving peace through international cooperation and collective security. Today, nearly every nation in the world belongs to the UN—192 countries in all.

When States become Members of the United Nations, they agree to accept the obligations of the UN Charter, an international treaty which sets out basic principles of international relations. According to the Charter, the UN has four purposes: to maintain international peace and security, to develop friendly relations among nations, to cooperate in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights, and to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations.

UN Members are sovereign countries. The United Nations is not a world government, and it does not make laws. It does, however, provide the means to help resolve international conflict and formulate policies on matters affecting all of us. At the UN, all the Member States—large and small, rich and poor, with differing political views and social systems—have a voice and vote in this process.

The United Nations has six main organs. Five of them — the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat — are based at UN Headquarters in New York. The sixth, the International Court of Justice, is located at The Hague, Netherlands.

The General Assembly

All UN Member States are represented in the General Assembly—a kind of parliament of nations which meets to consider the world’s most pressing problems. Each Member State has one vote. Decisions on “important matters”, such as recommendations on matters relating to international peace and security, admitting new members, the UN budget and the budget for peacekeeping, are decided by two-thirds majority. Other matters are decided by simple majority. In recent years, a special effort has been made to reach decisions through consensus, rather than by taking a formal vote.

At its 1998/1999 session, the Assembly is considering 166 different topics, including peace and security issues, disarmament, development, reform of the UN, protection of the environment and the year 2000 date-conversion problem for computers. The Assembly cannot force action by any State, but its recommendations are an important indication of world opinion and represent the moral authority of the community of nations.

The Assembly holds its annual regular session from September to December. When necessary, it may resume its session, or hold a special or emergency session on subjects of particular concern. When the Assembly is not meeting, its work is carried out by its six main committees, other subsidiary bodies and by the UN Secretariat.

The Security Council

The UN Charter gives the Security Council primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. The Council may convene at any time, day or night, whenever peace is threatened.

There are 15 Council members. Five of these — China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States—are permanent members. The other 10 are elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms. In recent years, Member States have discussed making changes in Council membership to reflect today's political and economic realities.

Decisions of the Council require nine yes votes. Except in votes on procedural questions, a decision cannot be taken if there is a no vote, or veto, by a permanent member. All Member States are obligated to carry out the Council's decisions.

When the Council considers a threat to international peace, it first explores ways to settle the dispute peacefully. It may suggest principles for a settlement or undertake mediation. In the event of fighting, the Council tries to secure a ceasefire. It may send a peacekeeping mission to help the parties maintain the truce and to keep opposing forces apart.

The Council can take measures to enforce its decisions. It can impose economic sanctions or order an arms embargo. On rare occasions, the Council has authorized Member States to use "all necessary means", including collective military action, to see that its decisions are carried out.

The Council also makes recommendations to the General Assembly on the appointment of a new Secretary-General and on the admission of new Members to the UN.

The Economic and Social Council

The Economic and Social Council, under the overall authority of the General Assembly, coordinates the economic and social work of the United Nations and the UN family. As the central forum for discussing international economic and social issues and for formulating policy recommendations, the Council plays a key role in fostering international cooperation for development. It also consults with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), thereby maintaining a vital link between the United Nations and civil society.

The Council has 54 members, elected by the General Assembly for three-year terms. It meets for one month each year, alternating its session between New York and Geneva. A special meeting of ministers discusses major economic and social issues. Beginning in 1998, the Council expanded its discussions to include humanitarian themes.

The year-round work of the Council is carried out by subsidiary bodies that meet regularly and report back to the Council. The Commission on Human Rights, for example, monitors the observance of human rights throughout the world. Other bodies focus on such issues as social development, the status of women, crime prevention, narcotic drugs and environmental protection. Five regional commissions promote economic development and strengthened economic relations in their respective areas.

The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was established to provide international supervision for 11 Trust Territories administered by 7 Member States and ensure that adequate steps were taken to prepare the Territories for self-government or independence. By 1994, all Trust Territories had attained self-government or independence, either as separate States or by joining neighbouring independent countries. The last to do so was the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (Palau), administered by the United States, which became the 185th Member State.

Its work completed, the Trusteeship Council now consists only of the five permanent members of the Security Council. It has amended its rules of procedure to allow it to meet as and when occasion requires.

The International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice is the main judicial organ of the UN. Consisting of 15 judges elected by the General Assembly and the Security Council, the Court decides disputes between countries. Participation by States in a proceeding is voluntary, but if a State agrees to participate, it is obligated to comply with the Court's decision. The Court also provides advisory opinions to the General Assembly and the Security Council upon request.

The Secretariat

The Secretariat carries out the substantive and administrative work of the United Nations as directed by the General Assembly, the Security Council and the other organs. At its head is the Secretary-General, who appoints such additional personnel as required and provides overall administrative guidance.

The Secretariat consists of departments and offices with a total staff of about 8700 drawn from some 160 countries. Duty stations include UN Headquarters in New York as well as UN offices in Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi.



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